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SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly VI (January 20-January 27)

REF: MINSK 44

11. (U) January 27 is the final day for presidential contenders to submit signatures. Each contender must submit a minimum of 100,000 signatures to the Central Election Committee. This is the sixth in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19, 2006 presidential elections.

Signature Campaign

12. (U) Signature Updates

The initiative groups of the following presidential contenders released updates on the number of signatures collected to date:

Candidate	Number of Signatures	Date
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Lukashenko	1,574,000	January 24
Milinkevich	178,000	January 21
Kozulin	160,000	January 24
Gaidukevich	140,000	January 19
Poznyak	100,000	January 19
Frolov	100,000	January 23
Skrebets (withdrew)	55,000	January 19

Candidate Activity

13. (U) Frolov Hangs Up His Hat?

On January 20, presidential contender General Valery Frolov announced he was ready to negotiate with 10 Plus presidential contender Aleksandr Milinkevich at the end of the signature campaign. Frolov claimed he was wrong in thinking he was the best candidate for president. However, Frolov claimed negotiations with Milinkevich would depend on Milinkevich's motives and his obligations to "forces" that support him. On January 23, the head of Frolov's initiative group, Igor Azarko, announced Frolov's intention to withdraw from the presidential race and that there would soon be a statement explaining his reasons.

14. (U) Poznyak to Return to Belarus

Presidential contender Zenon Poznyak told Russian journalists on January 23 that he would return to Belarus after being

registered as a candidate, and subsequently, gaining immunity. Poznyak left Belarus in 1996 for fear of being jailed. Poznyak accused other campaign groups of being created by the secret services and helping the regime rather than opposing it. Poznyak estimated that one million people would vote for him and his national revival and liberation movement.

15. (U) Skrebets Withdraws, Supports Kozulin

Jailed presidential contender Sergey Skrebets withdrew his nomination on January 26 and pledged his support to fellow presidential contender Aleksandr Kozulin. Kozulin's campaign manager welcomed Skrebets' support and noted that Kozulin's team was ready to admit all members of Skrebets' initiative group.

16. (U) CEC Expects Only Four Candidates

In a January 26 interview with the state newspaper Zvyazda, CEC President Ludmilla Yermoshina expected only four presidential contenders to be registered as candidates. Yermoshina claimed the signature campaign was calm, but noted that initiative groups were "too slow" submitting signatures. Yermoshina predicted that this would cause long lines of initiative group members at election commissions on the final day, resulting in disorganization and conflicts between commission members and initiative groups. [Note: On January 25, Kozulin's group filed a complaint to the CEC accusing executive authorities of refusing to certify signatures by claiming they were too busy, forcing signature collectors to wait hours for signature stamps.]

Warnings and Complaints

17. (U) Kozulin Angers CEC

Presidential contender Kozulin's January 17 article in Narodnaya Volya, in which Kozulin predicted he would be the next president, angered the CEC. Secretary of the CEC Nikolai Lozovik accused Kozulin of using the article for early electioneering and warned other contenders to refrain from "abusing" the CEC's yielding attitude. Lozovik claimed that such violations would be considered when it was time to register candidates.

18. (U) Complaint Filed Against Lukashenko

Brest resident Sergey Akulanka filed a complaint on January 20 with the police department against President Lukashenko's initiative group for allegedly violating Belarus' electoral code. According to Akulanka, on January 18, a woman without accreditation was collecting signatures for the President at the regional library and her signature sheets had no information about the candidate. In addition, she was allegedly distributing Lukashenko campaign leaflets. Police confiscated the signature sheets. Other reports of coercion by Lukashenko's team include forcing postmen, housing administrators, teachers, and hospital workers to collecting signatures or risk losing their jobs.

19. (U) Sheiman Denies Violations

Head of Lukashenko's campaign Viktor Sheiman in a January 24 radio interview denied that the President's initiative group was using government resources to aid their campaign. He also claimed that only accredited campaign managers were gathering signatures for Lukashenko, and without using coercion. He admitted that some of the 6,000 members of Lukashenko's initiative group have behaved badly, but those incidents were isolated and resolved.

10. (U) Milinkevich Appeals Official Warning

On January 20, Milinkevich's initiative group filed a complaint with the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor General's Office about the official warning it received from the CEC on January 19 (reftel). Milinkevich's lawyer, Vladimir Labkovich, claimed that only territorial commissions, not the CEC, could issue

such warnings. Labkovich also insisted that the printed material distributed by group members while collecting ballots was not campaign literature because it did not call for voting for Milinkevich. CEC Secretary Lozovik told independent online news source BelaPan that the CEC's warning could only be appealed with the Prosecutor General's Office and was certain that the warning would be upheld. Lozovik claimed that the CEC's warning was "well-founded" and backed with "incontrovertible" evidence.

¶11. (U) Gaidukevich Wants Milinkevich and Kozulin Removed

On January 25, presidential contender Sergey Gaidukevich petitioned the CEC to remove Milinkevich and Kozulin from the presidential race for early campaigning. Gaidukevich told independent online news source BelaPan that he sent the CEC various campaign calendars and leaflets that his initiative group had collected from Milinkevich and Kozulin campaign members and noted Kozulin's January 19 Narodnaya Volya article. Lozovik replied that the CEC was already aware of the allegations stated in Gaidukevich's petition and assured that all instances would be taken into consideration before registering candidates.

Media And Campaigning

¶12. (SBU) Milinkevich Plans Rally

On January 20, spokesperson for Milinkevich Sergey Voznyak announced Milinkevich's plans to hold a "large-scale" meeting with voters in March. According to Voznyak, the meeting would take place in a hall in downtown Minsk, but if authorities denied permission, it would happen in a central square. The rally is not linked to Lukashenko's March 2-3 All-Belarusian People's Assembly, because according to Voznyak, plans for the rally were made several months ago. [Note: On January 24, a senior member of the Milinkevich team told Pol/Econ Chief that the Milinkevich rally was indeed meant to draw attention away from Lukashenko's rally.]

¶13. (U) Kozulin and Milinkevich Demand TV Coverage

On January 26, Kozulin's campaign manager Mecheslav Grib petitioned CEC Head Yermoshina to allow him to appear six times per week on the state-controlled National Television's (BT) prime-time news program Panorama. Grib's petition referred to the Lukashenko's campaign manager Viktor Sheiman's January 24 appearance on the show, claiming the heads of other presidential contenders' campaigns were not given an opportunity to appear on TV. Grib lashed out at the narrative before Sheiman's appearance that claimed other campaign managers declined to give interviews or comments on the progress of the signature campaign. Grib and Milinkevich campaign official Aleksandr Bukhvostov claimed that BT did not approach them about interviews or comments.

¶14. (U) German-Russian Group to Launch Radio Broadcasts to Belarus

The European Commission (EC) on January 26 chose the German public relations firm Media Consulta and the Russian TV station Center TV (CTV) to broadcast news into Belarus for the next two years at a cost of two million euros. The broadcasts are to begin in February in time to cover the March election. Some opposition groups questioned the EC's choice, claiming that CTV had lucrative contracts with Lukashenko's national media agency. An EC spokesperson noted that CTV would be a "sleeping partner" with no active role. During his recent trip to Poland, Milinkevich regretted that the radio broadcasts had not yet started.

Preparations For Elections

¶15. (U) CEC Invites Baltic Observers and Not Georgians

The CEC announced on January 20 that it had invited the Latvian

and Lithuanian CECs to observe Belarus' elections. CEC Secretary Lozovik said the decision was based on Belarus' good

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business and personal relations with the Baltic countries. However, the CEC did not invite observers from Georgia's CEC because it allegedly has no contact with its Georgian counterpart. CEC Head Ludmilla Yermoshina claimed the decision was not political.

16. (U) Time to Nominate Precinct Commissions

Political parties, non-governmental organizations, and workers' collectives and groups (comprising no less than 10 workers or members) have until January 28 to nominate representatives to precinct commissions. The commissions will be formed by February 1.

17. (U) Military Polling Booths

The Defense Ministry on January 23 announced it would open 81 polling stations at military units and schools and would form election commissions for the stations by February 1. Military units and organizations with more than ten people were eligible to nominate candidates for the commissions. All nominations need to be supported with 10 signatures from voters living in the polling station's jurisdiction. The defense ministry added that signature collectors and electioneers must first obtain permission from commanders before soliciting signatures, and only during non-service hours. Military units are also giving "special" classes to soldiers to educate them about elections and election rules.

18. (U) Extra Security

Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov on January 24 issued a directive of security measures for the election from March 10 to March 27. The directive allows police to provide assistance to election commissions. Then Interior Ministry plans to set up round-the-clock operation headquarters, reinforce investigative and task teams, and use internal troops and police school cadets to police the street. Police are to check polling stations for fire safety and anti-theft security, provide security for meetings between candidates and voters, and protect international observers from theft. Police will guard ballots during transportation and storage.

19. (U) Lukashenko Vows No Kyrgyz Scenario

President Lukashenko told journalists on January 12 that the upcoming elections would not witness a "Kyrgyz scenario," because the GOB would not allow any destabilization to occur. He claimed that the GOB would not rig the vote and would do its utmost to avoid accusations by registering all presidential candidates, even those who "have no right" to be registered.

Quote of the Week

20. (U) CEC Head Yermoshina and her January 26 opinions of Poznyak and Skrebets:

"Poznyak's participation in the presidential campaign will liven up and obviously add some scandal should he return to Belarus."

"If a miracle occurs and this [Skrebets'] group collects 100,000 signatures, there will be no loosening the conditions for the man [Skrebets] held in custody at a pretrial detention center."

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